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## Outfitter requests hunting closure

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Saying big game numbers in the West Fork of the Bitterroot are precariously low, a member Bitterroot Elk Working Group has asked the state to institute an emergency hunting closure this year.

Scott Boulanger sent his request to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Director Joe Maurier last week.

As an outfitter of 13 years in the West Fork area, Boulanger said making the request wasn't easy.

"There aren't very many others who will feel the impact of a closure more than me," he said. "About 75 percent of my income comes from hunting."

Elk numbers have dropped dramatically over the past couple of years in the West Fork. Many blame high predator numbers, especially wolves, for most of the decline.

Boulanger was a member of the elk working group when it recommended setting the elk population objective in the West Fork at 2,000 several years ago. As late as 2005, biologists estimated the hunting district was home to at least that many elk.

Over the last two years, elk numbers dropped to about 765.

Worse yet, Boulanger said this year's aerial survey could only find 4 bulls for every 100 cows. The statewide elk management plan calls for a minimum of 10 bulls per 100 cows.

Elk calf numbers had dropped to a ratio of about 11 per 100 cows.

Biologists say it takes near 25 calves per 100 cows to sustain an elk herd that's not being impacted by wolves, Boulanger said. Throw wolves into the equation and the number of calves needs to be closer to 30.

FWP Regional Wildlife Manager Mike Thompson said the West Fork's Hunting District 250 does have one of the highest ratios between wolves and elk in the region.

"There are only two other hunting districts in Region 2 that come close - Superior and Phillipsburg," Thompson said.

Thompson said the agency has seen a similar decline in elk numbers in the Superior hunting district.

The situation in the West Fork isn't something new. Thompson said the elk working group, FWP officials and the commission have made adjustments to the upcoming hunting season to



address the issue.

Hunters will not be allowed to harvest any antlerless elk in the West Fork this season, including youth hunters and archers.

"This season is absolutely unique in Region 2," Thompson said.

FWP Director Joe Maurier said Monday he hadn't received Boulanger's request for the emergency closure, but probably would follow the recommendation from the local biologist on how to address it.

The state is about to release its tentative quotas on next year's wolf season. While those numbers are still being tweaked, Maurier said it appears the quota will be at least doubled and perhaps tripled.

"We will be coming out with our wolf quotas next week," he said. "They will be considerably higher. Maybe that will help."

Montana's wolf season is dependent on an upcoming decision from U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy on a lawsuit over the decision to remove wolves from Endangered Species Act protection.

Molloy asked for oral arguments in June.

Maurier hopes the judge will issue a decision within the month following the court hearing.

Wolves aren't the only predator keying in on elk and deer herds in the West Fork, Boulanger said. There are also healthy populations of mountain lions and bears.

Boulanger sent his letter to a variety of people before mailing it to FWP.

"I've probably received about 30 comments," he said. "There has only been one that was negative. It came from another outfitter from another state. He had the attitude that if wolves were going to kill all the elk, then we should shoot as many elk as we can."

Boulanger plans to offer his letter to the elk working group at its meeting tonight at 6:30 p.m. at the Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor's office in Hamilton. That meeting is open to the public.

"The numbers are the numbers," he said. "It's the right thing to do in my mind. There are other places to hunt that can withstand some pressure."

After last hunting season, Boulanger is convinced the elk and deer herds in the West Fork can't withstand any additional hunting pressure from humans.

Last year during the first week of general hunting season, he sent his best guide out with a client into the area around Piquett Creek in the West Fork. It was a place where at least three generations of outfitters associated with his company knew they could find elk.

The conditions were perfect. There was new tracking snow and the men used horses to get far away from the crowds. They hunted a week and never cut an elk or deer track.

"We had always seen elk there," he said. "He threw in the towel a day early. They never saw a track ... they can tell me the sky is not falling, but I know what we see.

"I don't want to be part of the race to see who kills the last elk in the West Fork," Boulanger said.

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